

ARTICLE APPEARED
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NEW YORK TIMES
26 May 1985

G.O.P., Party of International Revolution

By Barry Rubin

WASHINGTON no would have thought it? It seems to go against everything that they've traditionally stood for, but the Republicans have become the party of international revolution. Determined when possible to topple regimes deemed Communist or pro-Soviet, they are urging the United States to back guerrilla insurgency in Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Cambodia and Angola.

In some cases, particularly Nicaragua, they have met bitter opposition at home. In others, like Afghanistan, most Democrats have lent their support. This is probably as it should be. Whether we like it or not, support for local insurgencies is quickly becoming an acceptable means of working our will in the third world. The challenge now is to distinguish between cases, sorting the effective from the counterproductive ones.

Certainly, the ironies are a little shocking. Once the Cubans wrote guerrilla warfare manuals; now it is the Central Intelligence Agency. John F. Kennedy toyed with counterinsurgency; the Republicans have taken it a big step further to plain insurgency. You half expect Vice President Bush to disappear en route to a foreign leader's funeral, emerging — with beard, olive-drab fatigues and an AK-47 cradled in his arms — in some third world jungle.

How do the Republicans justify their tactics? They focus on the ends — fighting dictatorships and repression, particularly the Communist variety, and promoting human rights. And in today's climate, when Soviet repression and military might once again loom large in the minds of many Americans, these are effective arguments. The invasion of Afghanistan, the mass murders in Cambodia, the hostage crisis and the rise of Solidarity have reminded many Americans of the need to fight both perverted revolution and Communist tyranny.

Ronald Reagan won a landslide reelection by promising an America that could stand tall and go on the offensive. Most voters are still strongly

opposed to direct military intervention and old-style, C.I.A.-organized fighting bands. But support for "suitable," indigenous liberation movements is cheap and increasingly easier for many people to accept, both morally and politically.

Washington should realize, however, that there are limits to this support.

First, the Soviet Union does not worry about how much suffering insurgencies cause local people, but that is not how the American system works or American voters think.

Second, if support for insurgencies is going to help American and local interests — and not discredit Washington and its allies — it must back functioning movements with real indigenous support. Similarly, "our" insurgents will truly have to be "freedom fighters," even if they are not equal to the Founding Fathers.

Third, such activities must be appropriate to our regional goals and broader strategies, including diplomacy. When the Administration's intentions cannot be trusted — because it seeks to escalate further or has no interest in serious negotiations — backing insurgents will be unpopular. To refuse to support the rebels in such circumstances, as the Democrats have done in the case of the "contras," does not necessarily mean endorsement for existing regimes.

Helping the Afghan guerrillas fits these conditions, largely because they have so much popular support. The Russians are clearly the aggressors in this instance and are blocking meaningful talks about allowing an independent Afghanistan. Helping rebels in Cambodia is more questionable, since the non-Communist guerrillas there do little fighting and may in fact do more to legitimize the murderous Marxist guerrillas with whom they are allied than to sabotage the Vietnamese occupation.

The situation is the most complex in Nicaragua, where a legitimate opposition with a wide base of support struggles with an openly Marxist regime that is leaning further and further toward the Soviet Union. Democrats should be unapologetic about supporting the political opposition there, but they are right to be leery about the "contras" — mainly because C.I.A. control is discrediting the opposition and promoting the

most reactionary contra leaders. The war also gives Managua an excuse for a domestic crack-down, a military buildup and greater dependence on Moscow. Finally, many Americans are disappointed that the Administration is not reaping the benefits of the pressure it has already applied to achieve a political solution.

So far, at least, the Democrats have shown sound instincts in assessing conservative liberationism. Support for insurgencies may be in vogue, but foreign policy must mean more than overthrowing governments we don't like. □

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